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ABSTRACT

During summer and fall of 1997, 21 women rural principals in Nebraska and New Mexico were interviewed to highlight their positive experiences as principals. During the telephone interviews, which lasted 30-45 minutes, the principals were asked eight open-ended questions concerning: (1) how they got their first principalship; (2) why they were hired, what qualities got them the job; (3) what experiences prepared them for the principalship; (4) what they liked best about the job as principal; (5) what aspects of the job were most enjoyable; (6) what skills were important to the position as principal; (7) who they turned to with a problem; and (8) what support for their career was provided by family. Interview excerpts illustrating major themes comprise the bulk of this paper. The themes include the importance of leadership and people skills, love of watching children learn and grow, the positive influence of effective mentors, the value of support from superintendents, the fact that women have to work harder and be better at their jobs than men, and the importance of family support. Interview questions are appended. (TD)

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WOMEN IN THE RURAL PRINCIPALSHIP

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Introduction

Identifying "what's best" in the rural principalship was the stimulus for this study. We know that women are underrepresented in administrative roles. The literature documenting this reality is prodigious (Grady, 1992; Grady & Gosmire, 1995; Grady & O'Connell, 1993).

We know too, that although the majority of schools in the United States are rural, the literature on schooling often overlooks the rural principalship. Our research was designed to highlight the positive experiences of women in rural principalships.

Procedures

To obtain the information needed to answer the research questions addressed in this study, women rural principals were interviewed. We believed that interviewing women rural principals would provide the depth of information required by the research questions.

Women rural principals in Nebraska and New Mexico were the subjects of the study. Twenty-one women rural principals were available for telephone interviews during summer and fall 1997. The principals answered 8 open-ended questions (See Appendix) in sequence during interviews of 30-45 minutes in length.

Each researcher independently reviewed the transcripts of the interviews and identified major themes. The researchers compared their findings to verify accurate identification and naming of themes. Independently, the researchers developed categories of themes. The researchers then compared the categories and developed the final analysis. The results are reported in the following section.

In the interviews, we asked the subjects how they acquired their first principalships. The following comments represent the responses of these individuals.

"I was approached."

"I was originally a Title I teacher in the district. I did my internship under the current principal at that time, he left and recommended me. I was hired at the next board meeting. I don't know if the position was advertised."

"I got drafted into being a head teacher. Over the years I just got more and more skilled."

"I taught in this district for 3 years and was asked to prepare for the principalship. I was on the job before I got my Masters. I was a teaching principal for 2 years, half-time teaching principal for one year, then full time principal for four years."

"I was a teacher for 20 years; then I was a head teacher, I got my administrative certificate, applied for my first job and got it as principal."

"I applied, . . . I have been in the district for 17 years, 13 years as a teacher, 4 ½ years as a principal."

"I taught for 7 years and was then a counselor for 4 years. I was an assistant principal for 4 years and I will soon be starting my 3rd year as principal. This has all been in the same district."

"I was promoted from the classroom after 12 years of teaching experience to a position where I was acting principal at one building, principal at another building, Title I coordinator for the district and special education director for the district. I taught for 2 years in the district with my administrative certificate before being promoted. I had applied for a principalship in one other district but didn't get it. I was hired because I had an administrative certificate in place. I have people skills, and then I was asked by the special education director, and principal, to apply."

"I was teaching first grade for six years in the district. I applied for the principalship and got it."

"I was teaching here and had my administrative certificate, I was first a head teacher for one year. I taught for nine years. They came and asked if I would take it."

"I was in the district and was promoted from within. I didn't apply for the position of principal. It was offered to me."

"I applied for three jobs before receiving this principalship. The administrator before had the Special Education and Federal programs. He left the system and that job was split up. My first administrative job was to do federal projects; then when this principalship came up, they asked if I could do this principalship plus the federal projects. That was three years ago. The jobs have tripled and the staff has tripled, and the kids since then. I'm still doing all those jobs."

"I applied for three jobs before this one. I was the assistant principal at another school after I had taught for two years at that school."

We also asked the women principals why they were hired and what qualities got them their jobs. Their comments follow.

"I believe I was hired because of the continuity I provide, my commitments, dependability, and the belief I have in others including staff and students. I will try things and will listen to unhappy staff. I am able to brush off criticism and stay focused."

"I am very assertive; I was vocal as a teacher. I am respected and listened to by others. I want what's best for the children and use that guide in all my decisions. Everyone knows that. It was unusual for me to get this job because I was not from the community."

"Since high school I've always had leadership qualities. I am organized, and motivated. I have good communication and public relations skills. My speaking and counseling training, have caused me to be a good communicator."

"I am a very good teacher. I have good organization skills; my background in personnel and business has helped. I had lots of supervisory work and had developed administrative qualities outside of education."

"I was hired because of my reputation as a strong disciplinarian, because I am a decision maker and not afraid to take risks."

". . . my ability to do site-based management and my ability to be innovative and to create trends for the future. . . . They wanted a people person, someone who was not afraid to change things needing to be changed."

". . . because I have been in education a long time. . . . I have served on many committees. I am bilingual, I have a bilingual and counseling degree with a Masters in Curriculum and Instruction, Drug Abuse Training, Gang Intervention, and I am very involved with parents."

"My leadership qualities, knowledge of school, and commitment to the community got me the job. I am also motivated and dedicated."

"I handle things with common sense. I am fair with people."

". . . because I was motivated, enthusiastic. I have a positive attitude and I am a doer."

"I was hired because of my perseverance and I had been Federal Project Director before."

". . . because I had done well at the junior high as an assistant principal. I knew what we were doing in the district. I knew what our discipline policies were, and I was hired because of my professionalism."

As part of the interviews, we asked the women what experiences prepared them for the principalship as well as whether they had mentors and what roles mentors played. Their responses follow:

My preparation was the result of my grandmother who was a principal and my role model. She told me "keep focused, get to the heart of the matter." She always strove to keep me focused on honesty. The leading of the Lord has brought me to each position. You must have family support. People have put high expectations on me.

I had 10 years teaching experience in reading, elementary, and bilingual. I did my internship under the principal. He allowed me to do all the paper work, actually to do everything a principal would do.

I was a classroom teacher and coach since 1968. Between 1993 and 1988 I was a counselor and a teacher, then for 2 years I began assuming administrative responsibility. I had no title, everyone just called me head teacher. Then two superintendents, who I knew, encouraged me to apply for the principalship. I came from a family of administrators.

I had a former principal who encouraged me, and my superintendent is my mentor. She taught me budget and finance.

. . . my teaching experience as an athletic director, coach, and head teacher for 9 years. I also have a background of administration in my family. My mentor was a male superintendent who trusted me when he was not there. He felt that I could handle things and gave me lots of additional duties and responsibilities.

. . . teaching serious, emotionally, and behaviorally disordered children. I was also acting principal for 3 or 4 years. My education courses, I'm teaching at the University at night, have been helpful.

I was an assistant for 4 years and a team leader, and also as a counselor. I had a mentor throughout and I also had a mentor at the University but my husband is my number one mentor.

My mentor was the person who had this job before me. He saw my potential and supported me.

The encouragement I have received has been from my family and my own inner drive.

. . . possibly my husband who was a principal. . . being a Federal Project Director. I had fourteen years of teaching before becoming principal.

. . . twelve years of teaching experience.

We asked the principals to describe what they liked best about their jobs as principals. Their responses follow:

. . . my success with students and staff and family.

. . . having a vision of where you want the children to be when they leave your school. I like seeing kids enjoy learning.

I enjoy teacher supervision.

. . . seeing the growth of teachers and students and the difference each of us makes if we try. I see the way changes have been accepted by my community, and supported by the community for 2 bond issues. I have seen buildings and programs grow.

. . . there is something new every day.

I like seeing kids grow and develop. I love creating a happy environment.

. . . working with staff and staying in touch with children. I like helping staff with classroom management and classroom problems.

. . . watching the children learn and grow. Watching hands-on learning.

I like best the students, kids are funny and loving, that's the joy for me.

I do a lot of counseling.

I love the people I work with and this age group of children.

> . . . trying to make things better for students and trying to make their learning better.

As a companion question, we asked the women rural principals what aspects of the job they found to be most enjoyable. Their responses follow.

> . . . working with people. Working with youth, I love working with youth and helping them realize the potential they don't know they have. I have the opportunity to provide a safe environment and let them know we care. I think we touch all students.
>
> I like working with kids and teachers. I like planning with teachers to create new ideas.
>
> . . . working with kids and teachers and developing different ideas and programs.
>
> I like working with students.
>
> I like developing, together with my staff, developing programs and educational objectives where kids will excel.
>
> . . . being with students where ever they are.
>
> . . . the people
>
> . . . interaction and feedback I get from students. I like being around them.
>
> . . . the children
>
> . . . relating to people
>
> . . . working with the children. I love dealing with their discipline problems

We asked the women rural principals what skills they relied on as principals. Their responses follow:

> . . . high expectations, organization . . . I always remain a teacher at heart, I follow through, I'm always gaining knowledge, I am a communicator and mediator, I maintain confidentiality and perform, I can read people. I also work on cutting down the bureaucracy and I have the ability to work with those who need constant maintenance.

. . . I wear a lot of hats. I am a counselor, I counsel parents and teachers, I act as a mentor to others, I am a listener . . . I handle stress well.

. . . communication, not so much what people say but how they say it. I am very structured and it works for me. People appreciate and recognize it. In everything I do I apply my counseling skills.

. . . budgeting experience, ability to supervise people, public relations skills, listening skills, visibility, accessibility to staff and students

. . . my instincts.

. . . people skills . . . I have to get along with everyone.

. . . communication, leadership, educational background, curiosity, innovative ideas, and risk-taking.

. . . diplomacy, I am an encourager, and I am learning discreteness and restraint.

Communication, level-headedness, sense of humor, writing skills.

Organization and management skills, ability to keep people's lives organized, patience, perseverance, I am like the energizer bunny, I just keep at it until something works. I have my goals that I work for enjoying people is a skill that's important.

Organization, people skills, good communication skills, and listening skills.

I pray a lot . . . I rely on common sense and I treat people the way I'd like to be treated.

. . . my people skills, my positive attitude, my global perspective, and my ability to deal with detail.

We asked the women rural principals who they turn to when they have problems. Their responses follow:

I turn to my family, although I don't go into detail.

. . . my superintendent, we keep in constant communication. I talk with my husband, he is a good barometer for me. He tells me calm down and rethink before making decisions.

. . . other superintendents

. . . depends on the problem. If it is a problem that could cause risk I turn to my superintendent. If other principals may have experienced it, I'll check with them.

. . . my superintendent, old retired superintendents, and retired principals that I know. I also have a friend, a woman who is a former coach. . . the present principals in my area.

. . . the superintendent, the secretary, . . . staff, or team leaders.

. . . other principals or superintendent. . . . a group of friends who are educators.

Superintendent

It depends on the type of problem, I don't have "a" person, my superintendent is supportive. I still call my first mentor, who is out of state, if I need a confidential ear.

. . . my secretary or my husband

. . . my husband. In this job there's such a feeling of isolation. I've tried to network with other women, but they just want to be part of the "good old boy" system, and I won't compromise my ethics to do that.

We also asked the women rural principals to describe the support for their careers that they received from their families. Their responses follow:

My family supports my long hours. My extended family supports me. My parents are beginning to express their pride verbally and more often. My husband has been my stronghold and sees me through.

I had no support from my family early on. My husband is very supportive, comes from a family of educators and saw the importance of my being in education that's why he was my mentor.

The support I receive is unconditional support, absolute understanding. I tend to work around the clock. My family has taught me that it's all worth it. They understand the difference an educator can make in people's lives.

I have total support from my family. I could not have done it if not for my husband. As a woman in the rural principalship I find I have to be more assertive and better at my job. I have to work longer hours and show more success. Although I have had no problems, it has been a wonderful experience, a challenging experience, and very rewarding.

I got lots of support from my parents. I was raised on a farm and there was never a distinction between boys and girls, what boys could do girls could do. My husband has supported me. I am a coach, which is not a girl's thing. I am thankful for Title IX, it has opened up doors, and you know as women we have to be better.

My family gave me their blessing. They were great, my husband is a great listener.

The support I have received is total.

I get all the support that I need. They are my support system.

My family is extremely supportive.

My family has always been supportive. They have always told me "You can do it, just go for it. My husband is also very supportive, and as I was taking night classes and near the end of the semester, I would be so tired and he would go to school with me. I had a long way to drive at that time.

The support for my career that I've received from my family is good.

My husband has provided the ultimate support for my career. He has cooked and been my biggest support. He's a liberated man.

APPENDIX

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How did you get your first principalship? (Probe: Did you apply for many positions before you acquired this one?)

2. Why were you hired? What qualities got you the job?

3. What experience did you have that prepared you for the principalship? (Probe: Did you receive encouragement from someone? Did you have a mentor? What role did the mentor play? How many years did you teach?)

4. What do you like best about your job as principal? (Probe: What aspects of your position give you the greatest satisfaction?)

5. What aspects of your job do you find the most enjoyable?

6. What skills do you rely on in your position as principal?

7. Who do you turn to when you have a problem?

8. Describe the support for your career that you receive from your family.

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